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ABSTRACT

Thich Nhat Hanh, a 76-year-old Buddhist monk of the Vietnamese meditation school, exemplifies mindfulness in his daily life and teaches these principles around the world. Preferring to be called "Thay" which means teacher, he has written over 75 books on such subjects as mindfulness in daily living and its relation to social action. His teachings can be identified with "engaged Buddhism," which emphasizes the importance of community, yet points out that one need not look outside oneself for love because loving oneself with proper care and understanding is loving the world. Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment throughout the day. It can be practiced in the kitchen, bathroom, one's room, and on the walking path. Thay believes America's disregard for daily living has contributed to violence in the world and explains that its foreign policy and Americans' personal relationships disallow the deep listening needed to understand the suffering and issues of people in other nations. Adult educators such as Freire and Boal wish to transform fear and oppression into empowerment and understanding. Adult educators also agree with Thay that learning is alive and well within each person, each community, each culture; equality is in one's mind; dialogue is necessary; adult educators must be aware of the culture, customs, and very being of their students; and balance is valued. (Contains 19 references.) (YLB)

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Thich Nhat Hanh as Adult Educator

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Paper By

Joan Reynolds

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for HRD 646 International Adult Education

University of Southern Maine, Gorham

July 31, 2002

Presented to Dr. Desi Larson

Faculty of the Graduate School of Human Resource Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Thich Nhat Hanh is a seventy six-year-old Buddhist monk of the Vietnamese meditation school. "Thich" is the name given to all Buddhist monks. Nhat Hanh is a name that was given at his ordination meaning "One Action". He prefers to be called "Thay" which means teacher. These names greatly summarize this engaged teacher who exemplifies mindfulness in his daily life and teaches these principles around the world.

Thay has written over seventy-five books on subjects such as mindfulness in daily living and its relation to social action. He writes and teaches about issues of world hunger, floods, AIDS, addictions, refugees, terrorism, war and the connection between Christianity and Buddhism. He has addressed the state of inner freedom to prison inmates in his book Be Free Where You Are.

Because of his call to end the Viet Nam War through nonviolent action, he had been sanctioned by the South Vietnamese government to not return except under the restrictive governance of the Buddhist Church of Viet Nam. While he was in Viet Nam, he developed the School of Buddhist Studies and founded the Unified Buddhist Church of Viet Nam, which urged unification. These two Nhat Hanh factions have been outlawed in this country.

As a scholar, Thay has taught both at Columbia and Princeton Universities. While head of the Buddhist Peace delegation at the Paris Peace Talks, he was exiled. In France, he and his monks established a practice center and home for refugees called Plum Village. He founded the School of Youth for Social Services that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, resettled homeless families and organized agricultural cooperatives. He continues to write, teach loving communication worldwide, and communicate the message of matri (loving-kindness) and mindfulness throughout the world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Martin Luther King, in nominating Thay for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967, wrote "He is a holy man, for he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to worldwide brotherhood, to humanity"(Nobel Letter). His Holiness the Dalai Lama wrote "Thich Nhat Hanh shows us the connection between personal inner peace and peace on earth" (Nhat Hanh, 1996). Kaufmann, (2002) in his review of Robert King's book "Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Enhanced Spirituality in an Age of Globalization" points out three similarities in their spirituality practices: contemplative practice, social action and inter-religious dialogue. bell hooks (2002) describes Nhat Hanh as a presence in her life for twenty years and someone who has greatly influenced her work on social awareness and critical consciousness. Parachin (2000) discusses the "engaged spirituality" practices of Roman Catholic activist Dorothy Day and Thich Nhat Hanh, pointing out the common elements of community, awareness of oneself, living a life of engaged spirituality and having a sense of global awareness. The Los Angeles Times (1999) printed an excerpt from an interview with Thay on America's method with dealing with suffering "Rather than running away from our pain or sorrow or covering it up with consumption, suffering can be

recognized and embraced in order to alleviate it. Like a howling baby, suffering and crying, soothed by a loving mother, like garbage which can be composted into a beautiful flower, we should treat our anger with genuine affection, acknowledging in ourselves and expressing it with gentle, responsible honesty".

ENGAGED BUDDHISM

bell hooks (2002) writes that all the work that she does is built on loving-kindness. "When I write provocative and social criticism that causes readers to stretch their minds, to think beyond set paradigms, I think of that work as love in action. While it may challenge, disturb and at times frighten or enrage readers, love is always the place where I begin and end". In this interview, hooks speaks to Thay about the nonviolent civil rights leader and friend Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King had called for a non-violent path to ending racism by replacing the militancy of the black power movement. "King's personality and image are not the most important thing to be remembered. It is his message of strength and love that is important". King's message to me exemplified engaged Buddhism.

Engaged Buddhism emphasizes the importance of community, yet also points out that we need not look outside ourselves for love. Loving ourselves with proper care and understanding is loving the world. "Anything you do for yourself you do for society at the same time" (hooks, 2002). She cites Thay as the teacher who shows where spirituality and politics could meet. Nhat Hanh states in his interview with bell hooks "If you have to choose between Buddhism and peace, you must choose peace". Thay speaks of theories of political, spiritual and social recovery.

MINDFULNESS FOR DAILY LIVING

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment throughout the day, not just in a meditation hall. Mindfulness can be practiced in the kitchen, bathroom, in our rooms and on the walking path. Thay says " In Buddhism, there are many "dharma practices" that can be applied right away at this very moment and the practice should continue every day"(BBC, 2001). Couples should practice deep listening and compassionate speech with each other. If they do not treat each other with love, they and their children will continue to suffer and generations to follow will suffer.

According to Nhat Hanh, we must transform the seeds of anger, discrimination, superiority and inferiority by transforming these seeds because if we do not, we suffer. "Fear is born from ignorance and must be transformed into understanding"(hooks, 2002). "In each of us, there is nonviolence and there is also violence. With mindfulness, we can begin to transform the violence, the war in ourselves, into love, understanding and compassion"(Nhat Hanh, 1996).

Thay gives us simple meditations to practice moment by moment such as while brushing your teeth. "Brushing my teeth and rinsing my mouth, I vow to speak puringly and lovingly. While my mouth is fragrant with right speech, a flower blooms in the garden of my mouth". In simply breathing, we can practice "Breathing in, I calm my body, breathing out I smile. Dwelling in the

present moment I know this is a wonderful moment". When waking up, " Waking up this morning, I smile. Twenty-four brand new hours are before me. I vow to live fully in each moment and to look at beings with the eyes of compassion". This and other very simple but profound moment by moment meditations can be found in Thay's book Stepping into Freedom (1997). Living fully in each moment will transform the past and future since the only true living is now, according to this mindful educator.

SO WHAT FOR INTERNATIONAL ADULT EDUCATION?

Thay responds to the attack of the World Trade Center by explaining how our disregard for daily living has contributed to the violence in the world. The United States consumes 60% of the world resources yet account for 6% of the world's population. American students witness 100,000 acts of violence on television before finishing elementary school. Thay explains that our foreign policy and our personal relationships disallow the deep listening needed to understand the suffering and issues of people in other nations (Simpkinson, 2001). Adult educators such as Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Augusto Boal in *Theatre of the Oppressed* wish to transform fear and oppression into empowerment and understanding. Suffering is the compost, which can bring about the flowers and fruits of compassion. Community will remind us to apply insight into our daily lives, insight in every moment. International adult educators call out for the understanding of cultural differences as illustrated in *Action Aid's Reflect Mother Manual.* Thay's writings echo this same compassion.

Nhat Hanh states that the true teacher is within each individual. "A good teacher is someone who can help you to go back and touch the true teacher within, because you already have the insight within you. You do not need someone to transfer the Buddhanature to you, but maybe a friend who can help you touch that nature of awakening and understanding working within you"(hooks 20002). Is that not what Freire, *Action Aid's Reflect Mother Manual* and other adult educators agree on? Learning is not patriarchal but alive and well within each person, within each community, within each culture. Thay reemphasizes their philosophy.

Thay and bell hooks (2002) spoke about justice when there is no equality, in the example of a parent/child relationship. Justice seems to be defined in terms of self, which is misleading, according to them. Inequality is also in our minds and an illusion according to concepts in Thay's conversations with Phillip Berrigan (hooks, 2002). Freire, in his work on the oppressed, seems to echo this.

Thay says in his book *Be Still and Know*: "Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints"(p.13). He says regarding dialogue "Dialogue must begin, first of all, within oneself. If we cannot make peace within, how can we hope to bring about peace in the world?" (p.16). Dialogue seems to be necessary in all adult education, particularly in the international arena. Freire echoes this sentiment "Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people"(p.89). He further states "If I do not love the world-if I do not love life-if I do not love people-I cannot enter into dialogue"(p.90). This so resonates of Thich Nhat Hanh.

"If while we practice, we are not aware that the world is suffering, that children are dying of hunger, that social injustice is going on a little bit everywhere, we are not practicing mindfulness. We are just trying to escape"(Nhat Hanh, 1996). This seems to be the same awareness that the international adult authors echo-adult educators must be aware of the culture, the customs and the very being of their students.

Balance is another theme in Thay's teachings. "A life that is too comfortable makes spiritual growth difficult. Food, clothing and lodging should be adequate, but not too excessive" (Nhat Hanh, 1996). This resonates of what Korten says in his book on corporations (2001). The Standard of Living reading in Sachs' text talks about the idea that true richness consists in limiting desires. This is valued in the Buddhist population. True wealth is self-awareness and equilibrium. This is valued in contrast to the West who holds this in disdain. As adult educators, we must be aware of what value is placed on adult learning and what is important to the groups we work with. Our Western values may not be the values of the groups we deal with. Korten says " Few rights are more fundamental than the right of people to create caring, sustainable communities and to control their own resources, economies and means of livelihood. These rights in turn depend on their right to choose what cultural values they will embrace, what values their children will be taught, and with whom they will trade" (p.265). This reminds us once again of engaged Buddhism's basic tenants.

Thay, in the BBC interview (2001) states we must remind ourselves that true happiness comes when we have true love, true compassion, true generosity and true inclusiveness. "It is alright to live in a small house, to drive a small car and still have time to love. At Plum Village, we have a computer. Every fifteen minutes, there is a bell sound from the computer and we stop to consciously follow our breath. A computer is only an instrument and we should not allow ourselves to become a victim of it"(BBC, 2001).

Thay speaks of interconnectedness and inter being as the basis of engaged Buddhism. The elements for creating capacity-vision, creativity, self-esteem, communication and resource management, Sach's participation and socialism readins, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights all reflect engaged Buddhism.

I chose to look at Thich Nhat Hanh as teacher in this international adult education paper because his way of life and writings seem to be relevant to this topic. Living fully allows true learning to take place. I believe that is what Thich Nhat Hanh and adult education have in common, as well as those characteristics discussed in this paper.

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Signature:	Joan Reynolds
Organization:	
Position:	
Address:	P. O. Box 463 Woolwich Maine
Zip Code:	04579
Telephone No:	207-443-2062

Fax:	207-442-4965
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